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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the need for differentiating language arts instruction for gifted students in grades K-8. It begins by describing differentiation approaches, including acceleration, depth, complexity, challenges, and creativity. It then explains how teachers can differentiate the language arts curriculum in the following five areas: (1) literature, including providing many experiences for students to read quality texts and emphasizing critical reading; (2) writing, including empathizing the development of skills in expository and persuasive writing; (3) language skills, including emphasizing the understanding of word relationships and origins, and the development of an appreciation for semantics, linguistics, and the history of language; (4) oral communication, including developing skills in evaluative listening, debate, and discussion; and (5) foreign language, including promoting early foreign language study and acceleration of language study. The final part of the digest explores individual differences among verbally talented students and presents two vignettes to portray the differences that exist in gifted learners who are the same age and exhibit aptitude in verbal areas. It is concluded that educators responsible for planning language art programs for high ability learners need to consider multiple variables in the areas of differentiation approach, content, and individual differences among gifted learners. (CR)

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By
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Differentiating the Language Arts for High Ability Learners, K-8

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Gifted children often achieve language competency at an earlier age than their chronological age-mates. High-ability learners may excel in many language arts areas from reading and literary analysis to creative writing, poetry, and prose. Typically, teaching in the language arts has emphasized reading skills and low-level questions over active learning and inquiry (Lockwood, 1992). Such a low-level emphasis fails to challenge high-ability learners who have mastered the fundamental reading skills and are ready for high-level applications of those skills in critical reading, expository writing, oral communication, linguistic and vocabulary development, and foreign language (VanTassel-Baska, 1996). Thus there exists a real need to differentiate language arts experiences for verbally talented learners at all stages of development.

Differentiation Approaches

Differentiation approaches so critical to consider when adapting language arts curriculum include ***acceleration, depth, complexity, challenge,*** and ***creativity***. Typically, curriculum is organized according to grade levels, with each subsequent grade level expectation being more demanding than the preceding. When we differentiate curriculum for gifted students, we must move to a higher level of expectation in respect to content, process, and concept demands. One way of accommodating higher expectations effectively is to make more advanced curriculum or content available to students at a younger age, ensuring that all levels of the standards are traversed in the process. When students are provided with advanced content or accelerated through curriculum, teachers need to adjust their expectations to match the students' advanced level. The level of curriculum for gifted learners must be adapted to their needs for ***advancement, depth,*** and ***complexity***. For example, after a discussion on major themes in novels and other works, a student might be asked to choose a novel and write an essay about the first chapter in which major themes of the work are explored (VanTassel-Baska, 2002).

Another aspect of differentiation that needs clarification is in the choice of ***instructional strategies*** employed. In many respects, there are no strategies that are differentiated only for students who are gifted or have high ability in language arts. Rather, strategy use is inextricably tied to the nature and level of curriculum being addressed. A diagnostic-prescriptive approach to instruction allows students to move at a fast pace and not be subject to instruction in skills already learned. Such an approach is powerful because it allows for an assessment process by which each student's language arts ability can be discerned and adapted for that student.

Some instructional strategies are highly effective when combined with advanced curriculum. For example, questioning can be a powerful tool for demonstrating or encouraging high level discussions in gifted clusters if the stimulus reading or viewing was also challenging. Use of open-ended activities can also prove effective if they are of requisite difficulty. Problem-based learning by the sheer demands of working on ill-structured problems poses a particularly appropriate instructional approach for gifted program use. Thus strategy differentiation involves a set of techniques that need to be matched to advanced curriculum in order to be effective for advancing the learning of gifted students.

A fourth element of differentiation relates to ***challenge***, which can best be provided through careful selection of materials for use in classrooms. Most basal materials are well below the challenge level for gifted students. Evidence suggests the need for careful selection of materials that meet basic specifications for exemplary curriculum in the language arts and other subject areas, as well as appropriate curriculum based on differentiation features (Johnson, Boyce, & VanTassel-Baska, 1995). While the selection of nationally available materials meeting these specifications may be small, such materials do exist and should be used to guide the differentiation process for curriculum. Examples include Junior Great Books, Great Explorations in Math and Science (GEMS) (http://www.lhs.berkeley.edu/GEMS/GEMS.html), and A Language Arts Curriculum for Grades 2-11 published by Kendall-Hunt.

Finally, it is important to carefully differentiate project work to meet the criterion of ***creativity.*** As more emphasis is placed on collaborative project work at all levels of schooling, it is critical that educators use a set of standards to judge whether or not such work is sufficiently challenging for gifted learners and whether or not the contextual settings in which the work is carried out will promote sufficient growth for them. Differentiation of project work may be judged based on the medium in which the project is done and the variables and skills addressed by the demands of the work. Providing alternatives for student products also enhances the creativity dimension of the language arts curriculum. For example, students could write a poetry book, using their choice of poetic forms.

High ability learners need language arts curriculum differentiation in the five following areas:

Literature: Literature should provide many experiences for students to read quality texts. College-bound book lists that include poetry, plays, essays, biography, and autobiography are available at most libraries, as are the books noted by Thompson (1998) and Baskin and Harris (1988). Students should read broadly across subject matters and develop a familiarity with favorite authors and their lives. Emphasis on critical reading and the development of analysis and interpretation skills should be a focal point.

Writing: A writing program for high ability learners should emphasize the development of skills in expository and persuasive writing, focusing the writing process on draft development, revision, and editing, and developing ideas and arguments on current issues.

Gifted students also need experience in writing in other forms such as narrative and informative, using appropriate models for development. For older students, copying the style of favorite authors would be a useful exercise to gain control over written forms.

Language Study: The formal study of English grammar and vocabulary should be a major component of language study. Thus major language emphasis should involve understanding the syntactic structure of English and its concomitant uses, promoting vocabulary development, fostering an understanding of word relationships (analogies) and origins (etymology), and developing an appreciation for semantics, linguistics, and the history of language. An integrated language study approach across these areas is highly desirable.

Oral Communication: Gifted students can profit from a balanced exposure to oral communication both through listening and speaking. Major emphases should include developing the following skills: (1) evaluative listening; (2) debate, especially for use in formal argument; and (3) discussion, particularly question-asking, probing, and building on ideas stated. An emphasis on oral interpretation and drama productions provide one of many venues for creative talented learners to develop higher level skills.

Foreign Language: Students advanced in verbal ability can benefit greatly from early foreign language study, accelerating through four years in one language and at least two years in a second language by the time they graduate from high school. The choice of a second language should be one of the languages spoken in the student's geographic area so that follow-up opportunities would be available. Good choices for second and third language study include Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and Latin (VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, & Boyce, 1996).

Individual Differences among Verbally Talented Students

The implications of adapting a language arts curriculum for students of the same age but different levels of functioning in the language arts presents a real challenge, even for experienced educators. Yet such individual differences prevail. The following two vignettes portray the vast differences that exist in gifted learners who are the same age and exhibit aptitude in verbal areas. Based on the in-school and out of school opportunities as well as a personal level of functioning, these students require very different language arts experiences if they are to be sufficiently challenged. Each is 13 years of age and entering the eighth grade. Each has been identified as gifted on multiple measures, including ability and achievement measures, teacher recommendation, and prior performance in class work as evidenced in portfolios, grades, and performance-based tasks.

Abel demonstrates adult level reading comprehension and mastery of literary elements such as plot, character, and setting, but tends to read easy texts, enjoying reading the same author's works. The Harry Potter books are personal favorites. He exhibits highly capable use of language in the basic forms of narrative and informative writing. Abel, however, does less well with advanced forms of writing such as expository. His research skills are limited and his independent work unexceptional. Abel comes from a single parent family and is an only child, living with his mother. He is currently enrolled to take Year 1 of Spanish at his middle school. He has participated regularly in Saturday/Summer programs at the local college. He loves drama, having been cast in two plays during middle school. He has placed in spelling bees at the regional level, representing his school.

Adrienne is bilingual in English and French and is currently enrolled in Year 2 of Latin. She has traveled extensively, including Italy and England where she visited authors' homes and worksites. She won multiple writing awards for her essays and has a five-year history of theater credits for her acting. Adrienne's parents are both professionals; she is the older of two children. Last year she designed and implemented a literary study on a period, author, and subject/theme of 6000-7000 words that was published by a literary journal. She reads widely and deeply, enjoying multiple genres, especially poetry. She has a strong command of language in all forms.

While Abel has the need for stronger emphasis on advanced reading and writing activities in his language arts program as well as continued opportunities in drama, he is progressing very well in his work in verbal areas. A session with his mother might help her see the value of his varied undertakings. She should be encouraged to help him continue his interest in theater, his desire to attend outside classes, and his incipient involvement in foreign language.

Adrienne, however, will require more individualized work to keep her interested. She might be best placed into high school English classes, perhaps at sophomore level and be considered a strong candidate for Advanced Placement English next year. A mentorship or special class at the university would also be an important option to explore with her. Her parents should be apprised of how advanced she is and encourage her to accelerate her learning in English, commensurate with her foreign language accomplishments.

Conclusion

Educators responsible for planning language arts programs for high ability learners need to consider multiple variables in the areas of differentiation approach, content, and individual differences among gifted learners. Moreover, language arts programs should be as comprehensive as possible and articulated across the K-12 years of schooling. Only then will verbally gifted students be well served.

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